

COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED CONSERVATION OF *ANCISTRODON*
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Taxonomists have long been warned that it is the much larger group of "non-taxonomists" which threatens, through exasperation with name-changing of taxonomists, the authority of nomenclatural decisions, by withdrawal of the respect and faith that are so essential to stability. But even taxonomists are tried at times by occasional lapses of their own system for achievement of stability. *Ancistrodon* vs. *Agkistrodon* is a case in point. Herpetologists, particularly American, have endured a half-century of alteration between acceptance of *Agkistrodon* on authoritative assurance and acceptance of *Ancistrodon* on equally authoritative grounds. No less than four exchanges of one name for the other have occurred, each followed by a period of relative uniformity of opinion.

In exasperation with this vacillation, I heartily urge the Commission to fix the orthography of the name with finality and the weight of its explicit authority. The only question is: which orthography is to be conserved?

As a personal preference I would strongly endorse perpetuation of *Agkistrodon*, since this is the name to which I have been accustomed. Certainly a large proportion of active herpetologists have the same preference, for the case made for it by Klauber (1956) was both persuasive and widely-noted. I am not aware of any defended stand taken for *Ancistrodon* since that time, until Dr. Parker presented his brief.

Nevertheless a large number of herpetologists, Parker among them, has continued to use *Ancistrodon* despite Klauber's arguments and any public refutation of them. A worldwide census taken to reveal relative popularity, in the sense of accustomed use, of these two orthographies among living zoologists would probably reveal at most no more than a 40–60 per cent disparity. A complete census would be difficult even to approach, since the generic name is very widely used in popular works, zoos and experimental studies. Certainly most usages are not based upon critical reappraisal of nomenclatural merit; they certainly stem largely from the influence of some work accepted as a guide, whether old or new, popular or technical. A reasonable number of works that might wield such influence use each orthography, *Agkistrodon* and *Ancistrodon*.

A choice between the two names by the Commission can seemingly not be made on grounds of popularity. The principles likewise provide little solace, for conservation of either name violates some prescription of procedural policy. Conservation of *Agkistrodon* would in this case suspend application of Art. 32 of the 1961 Code, and conservation of *Ancistrodon* would require suspension of the "automatic" provision of Art. 86. The long history of official recognition of *Ancistrodon* implicit (and unfortunately not explicit) in earlier Codes certainly lends weight to acceptance of that version. Nevertheless no clear-cut case can be made incontrovertibly supporting one choice over the other.

The circumstances of the present case fall into the classic pattern leading to growth of an "issue" on which hinges personal pride and determination to maintain the "status quo", whatever it may be for any given person, since no strongly persuasive case is evident for the opposite view. An alternative proposal might be submitted to the Commission to rule just the opposite of Dr. Parker's request—namely to conserve *Agkistrodon* and reject *Ancistrodon*. Then the matter will have "arrived" at a full-blown issue comparable in ultimate significance to some famous historical parallels such as the number of angels that can stand on the head of a pin, or which end of the egg must be broken first.

Since the choice is of so little intrinsic significance, and has no specific bearing upon the principles of the Code or their interpretation (and the Commission is urged to

avoid all involvements of this nature, as indeed is implied by Parker), I strongly recommend that zoologists defer in good grace to the intent of the initial proposal, which in a sense holds a priority that should be the determining factor in a case, such as this, wherein professional courtesy is more at stake than principle or popularity in establishing stability.

Accordingly I strongly urge approval of Parker's request for conservation of *Ancistrodon* Beauvois, 1799.

By Laurence M. Klauber (*San Diego, California, U.S.A.*)

I wish to express my opposition to the proposal made by Dr. H. W. Parker that the Commission use its plenary power to validate the generic name *Ancistrodon* as an emendation of *Agkistrodon* Beauvois, 1799, placing *Ancistrodon* on the Official List of Generic Names in Zoology, and, at the same time, placing *Agkistrodon* on the Official Index of Rejected and Invalid Generic Names.

I take this position because of the belief that Dr. Parker's recommendation is contrary to the achievement of stability in nomenclature. Dr. Parker's recommendation is based on the premise that Beauvois made an error in transliteration in devising the name *Agkistrodon*, which, therefore, should be changed to *Ancistrodon*.

It seems to me that if continuity and stability are to be maintained in nomenclature the original describer's spelling of a name should be retained. If a treatment similar to that which Dr. Parker has suggested in this instance were adopted there is no information presently available as to how many other names might be subject to similar emendation. Taxonomists should not be subject to uncertainties of this kind, but should be afforded a feeling of confidence if they follow the simple and obvious procedure of adopting the original spelling of a name.

Of the usages in two American herpetological journals, showing the number of articles employing the names in question, the following comparative figures are of interest: COPEIA, 1913 to 1965, *Agkistrodon*, 146, *Ancistrodon*, 31; HERPETOLOGICA, 1936 to 1965, *Agkistrodon*, 82, *Ancistrodon*, 28. The frequency of references appearing in these journals is high because of the importance of this genus in the North American fauna. It is clear that Dr. Parker's suggestion would involve a more extensive revision in taxonomic procedure than a retention of *Agkistrodon*.

I am of the opinion that, if any action upon the part of the Commission is deemed necessary, stability should dictate that the generic name *Agkistrodon* Beauvois, 1799, be placed on the Official List of Generic Names in Zoology, and that the name *Ancistrodon* should be placed on the Official Index of Rejected and Invalid Generic Names in Zoology.

By Robert Mertens (*Natur-Museum und Forschungs-Institut Senckenberg, Frankfurt am Main, Germany*)

I regret that I cannot agree with the application by Dr. H. W. Parker to place the emendation *Ancistrodon* (with same author and date) of the generic name *Agkistrodon* Beauvois, 1799, on the Official List of Generic Names in Zoology.

I am of the opinion that in such cases stability and uniformity are served best by strict recognition of the relevant original spellings. As it is even possible to use arbitrary combinations of letters, if capable of being pronounced, for scientific names, I feel there is no justification for the emendation of names for philological reasons, even if these might be correct.

In the case of the emendation *Ancistrodon* (by Wagler, 1830) of *Agkistrodon*, Parker states quite correctly that the spelling *Ancistrodon* almost was in general use at the turn of the century. But when considering the present situation modern usage, beginning approximately with the year 1907, seems more important than former literature. There is no difficulty in proving that there is an overwhelming majority of important herpetologists in the most recent period who correctly use the spelling *Agkistrodon*.